



## Co-operatives or Protégés?

The classic revolutionary literature on co-operatives divides into two parts, characterised **first** by Marx's, Engels' and Lenin's disdain for co-ops under the bourgeois dictatorship, and **second** by Lenin's embracing of co-ops as the sufficient and necessary means, under proletarian rule, of uniting the town and the country and of effecting a transition, for the proletarian and non-proletarian masses together, into socialism.

For South Africans this poses theoretical problems.

We cannot just ignore what the classics say about co-ops under capitalism, not because they are "classics", but because the arguments are strong, and because ours is still a

bourgeois state. Therefore the arguments that Marx makes in “The Critique of the Gotha Programme” (attached, and downloadable via the link below), for example, still apply to us.

Yet we appear to need the opportunity, that co-ops seem to provide, of socialising fragmented and incomplete individual efforts, or in other words of organising the unorganised peasantry, petty-bourgeoisie, and more generally, those whom capitalism has failed to employ.

In the light of these considerations, let us look at some of what Karl Marx said about co-operatives on pages 4, 5, 6 and 9 of “The Critique of the Gotha Programme”. Most of it is scathing. The best that Marx can manage to say for co-ops is:

*“That the workers desire to establish the conditions for co-operative production on a social scale, and first of all on a national scale, in their own country, only means that they are working to revolutionize the present conditions of production, and it has nothing in common with the foundation of co-operative societies with state aid. But as far as the present co-operative societies are concerned, they are of value only insofar as they are the independent creations of the workers and not protégés either of the governments or of the bourgeois.”*

Prior to the above he remarks (about the Gotha Programme):

*“Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of the*

*democrats) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution.”*

The co-operation that is patronised by the state, and also state distribution (i.e. what we now call “delivery”) is only “vulgar socialism”, says Marx.

The Critique of the Gotha Programme is not a long document (though it is very rich). Please try to read it, and re-read it from time to time. It is invaluable for many purposes, and not just for this question of co-ops.

**Illustration:** Sewing Co-operative, Rwanda, 2009

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).